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Word count (excluding abstract): 7747

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The digital transformations taking place across the African continent present an urgent need for fresh thinking in the study of publics. This introduction lays out the impetus and contribution of this Special Issue to such a rethinking of the study of publics in Africa. Following in the footsteps of a wider body of scholarship, we draw on Africa's pasts and present in order to move beyond the limiting assumptions, histories and languages that are embedded within the western scholarship on publics. We make the case that both de-westernising and capturing publics in a digital age in Africa require openness to a diversity of disciplines, approaches and questions. In addition, we explain how, collectively and individually, the articles in this Special Issue contribute to taking up this task. Taken together, the articles are an eye-opening collection on the unfolding practices of citizens convening and participating in discussions using both newer and older media and communication platforms across Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Zimbabwe. Contributions cover diverse disciplinary perspectives and empirical cases that investigate publics convening around digital platforms from WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook to weblogs and dating apps on mobile phones. We see this endeavour of examining the complex and dynamic digital transformations across Eastern Africa as part of a crucial scholarly turn in which the study of African society and politics helps us to rethink ideas and concepts that have heritages elsewhere, and to understand them in a new light.

Keywords: publics, popular culture, digital technology, social media, internet, mobile communications, Africa, eastern Africa

It is time to engage seriously in the study of publics in Africa. The impetus for this is not a reprise of the 'not yet,' that awkward and impatient imposition of foreign concepts upon African histories and political realities. Rather, the impetus comes from digital transformations occurring across the continent that are in urgent need of fresh thinking

and different understanding. Networked citizens' discussions take place on WhatsApp about the performance of newly-devolved county governments in Kenya. Charismatic figures are developing strong follower-ships through gossip websites and online tabloids in Rwanda. Surreptitious election campaigning and far-reaching debate unfold through Facebook pages in Zimbabwe and Zanzibar. There is an efflorescence of #hashtag commentary, satire and the rise of a Twitterati. The cacophony of shared voices made possible by the continent's rapid growth in mobile and internet connectivity at first seems beguiling. Beyond the African continent, these disruptions of a digitally networked society have challenged cherished formulations of what 'publics' are and should be. The digital realm is emerging as fragmented, transient, unstable and unreliable. Our digital age appears to be prone to distorting the public world with its capacities for filter bubbles, echo chambers, fake news, bots and hacks. This is no agora, no polis. There are no rational coffee house deliberations in earshot, no laudable unifying imaginaries through the circulation of unchanging printed texts. Even mediated radio and television broadcasts to mass audiences, with all their limitations for public discussion, appear to be an endangered species of modern collective experiences. With western teleologies in trouble, Africa's putative 'not yet' no longer matters, if it ever did at all.

In Africa, digital media are providing scholars with a reason and opportunity for revisiting the question, and the analytical lens, of publics with new vigour and less normative baggage. This special issue presents empirically grounded analyses of the diverse digital spaces and networks of communication springing up across the Eastern African region. The articles offer a plural set of reflections on whether and how we can usefully think about these spaces and networks as convening publics, where citizens come together to discuss matters of common interest. The authors make clear the need

to unshackle such studies from slavish acceptance of outsiders' prescriptions on what constitutes desirable publics. They highlight the importance of being attentive to rapidly changing everyday realities across Africa in which people are coming together around the circulation of ideas in ways that include digital means of communications. In so doing, the contributions bring forward new ways of thinking about, through and with publics, alongside other heritages in Africanist scholarship that have continued salience. Looking outwards from the region, such different perspectives into our digitally mediated world offer theoretical novelty that furthers how we think about the notion of publics and their political significance.

Making sense of social and political change in Africa in the digital age is a crucial and confounding task for African Studies. We only have to reflect on how communications and media have been important threads within the longstanding study of authority and political mobilisation, diversities in social organisation and ideas of citizenship, limits and possibilities of state control, and global historical relations between Africa and the world, to see that the disruptive effects of digital transformations across the continent require serious attention.[1] The continent has evolved from minimal access to fixed-line and mobile telecommunications in the early 2000s, to 772 million mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions in 2016 and 240 million individuals using the internet.[2] While still the lowest globally on both accounts, penetration of digital communications in the African region has experienced the highest worldwide growth since 2005. In 2010, Etzo and Collender thus claimed "only superlatives seem appropriate to describe the mobile phone 'revolution' – its impact and its potential – in Africa."[3] Already then, the growing number of users, the speed and ease of communications, and diverse uses of the technology, such as money transfers

and election monitoring, appeared to be quickly and profoundly reshaping people's political, economic and social lives.

Then, as now, all that is new (or is not new) dazzles many commentators and scholars to distraction. For those who subscribe to the digital revolution thesis, it is 'all out and all change' as promising new apps displace last year's legacy technologies. The notion of Africa as a site of innovation in digital media is alluring and holds some truth. Well before mobile digital wallets took off in advanced economies, at the end of 2014 more than 20% of mobile connections in sub-Saharan Africa were already linked to a mobile money account.[4] The reduced cost of smartphones, and low-cost and free access to social networking sites on both smart and feature phones, have opened up new, networked opportunities for private and public communication and information flows. From Nairobi's self-styled 'Silicon Savannah' to the Rwandan state's championing of a technological innovation agenda, the 'Africa Rising' trope has a pixelated digital sheen. Many who resist this thesis revel in critiquing such impatient and ahistorical fetishism of technology, with the all too easy counsel of not-so-fast. For the majority of Africans, the continent's putative digital rising is far from the 'leapfrog' out of persistent poverty that some would have it be. Moreover, the distribution of digital power and profit can disproportionately serve the dominant. Surveillance technologies and capabilities on the continent have become increasingly sophisticated, evident in specific contexts, for example in Ethiopia or Sudan.[5] On one side, dazzled by all that appears new, and on the other, forming a sweeping critique of such techno-determinism, the big debates on who wins in Africa's digital age tend to produce more heat than light.

The best of growing scholarship on Africa's digital age does not hurry to evaluate its overall promise or peril.[6] This scholarship takes as a given the monumental scale and richness of change that the past decade or two of mobile telephony use in

Africa has brought to how people organise, exchange, relate and come together in everyday life. Yet these investigations are grounded in close attention to empirical specificities, and they seek to unravel how and why this change is taking particular forms, and the significance of this. We must better understand Africa's digital transformation for what it is, not what it should or could be, or indeed what it is not. The collection of studies here belongs firmly to this vein of scholarship.

Digital media reveal rapid and profound changes to how people communicate, and their presence and contributions to a wider collectivity. For example, Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) could form a collective voice around the hashtag #whatwouldmagufulido, drawing on public information about the activities of President Magufuli of Tanzania in his first few months in office to produce and publicly circulate a critical commentary on the Kenyan government.[7] At the same time, who produces information, where and how it circulates, acquires particular characteristics tied to access and knowledge of networked communications, devices and supporting infrastructure. While KOT appear empowered to produce a collective critical message through Twitter and the hashtag function, digital media are also irreducibly material and inherently constrained. Digital content can be and is monitored, and digital communications may be blocked. The Sudanese, Ethiopian and Rwandan governments, for example, have posed omnipresent threats of surveillance through their monitoring of citizens' online activities. Governments impose black outs on social media and/or internet access, for example, during elections as in Uganda and the Gambia in 2016, or in response to internal unrest and protests, as in Cameroon in early 2017.[8] Equally, dynamically networked communications are often able to evade full censorship and control. In Rwanda, gossip websites flourish as sites of a vibrant youth culture, beyond the purview of the state.[9] Social media and mobile phones in Sudan provide the

connective infrastructure and means for collective humanitarian action and discussion outside of the realm of state coordination.[10] The very existence of unregulated, grassroots discussions and action reveals the limits upon the state's control over digital communications.[11]

How ideas are archived and recalled becomes virtual, allowing for information to be fleeting and changeable, and also replicated and recalled by many, over time and space. Individuals on the continent absorb website and social media content using a range of methods, from personalised devices such as mobile phones,[12] to increasingly complex networks of internet cafes, tablets, USB drives and mobile phones.[13] Who can process, adapt and make use of information does not depend only on place, position or networks on the ground, but also on access to and knowledge of digital forms. These dynamics suggest qualitative and profound changes to the nature and scope of publics in everyday life. Spatial boundaries of public discussions can be blurred as a 'street parliament' discussion in Mombasa extends into social media.[14] The temporal boundaries of public discussion can become increasingly difficult to pinpoint as people can communicate almost instantaneously or choose to delay communications.[15] To talk of digital publics, then, is to rejuvenate how we think about publics in a profoundly transformative digital age.

We see this endeavour as part of a crucial turn in which the study of African societies and politics helps us to rethink ideas and concepts that have heritages elsewhere, and to understand them in a new and different light. It echoes recent, nascent calls in African politics and media studies,[16] which suggest ways to navigate the universalist claims of publics and public sphere theories from western scholarship. We might begin from specific empirical realities, yet also be open to considering their potential contributions to normative democratic aspirations.[17] Or we could apply a

genealogical approach to arrive at particularist ideas about the nature and possibilities of publics from within African historical experience.[18] These studies emphasise the importance of considering the digital as part of wider contemporary social and political realities and not somehow separate from them. Even so, there remains a risk in attempting to capture 'what is' going on by using the 'digital' as an adjective to condition a public sphere.[19] While we may talk of 'digital publics' in order to draw attention to the profound changes that are going on, we must assiduously account for the messy and convergent nature of the communication ecologies that people inhabit, where physical spaces and older media mix with portable digital technologies.

There are diverse sources of scholarly inspiration for thinking with and through African specificities, whilst recasting conceptual frameworks that may have a foreign heritage. We can see this in attempts in postcolonial scholarship to circumvent Eurocentrism and parochialism.[20] This means not only arguing the empirical and conceptual value of the continent on its own terms, but also as a source of theory generation offering insights into worlds beyond.[21] Such an endeavour is evident in Mamdani's advocacy for a "third way," which does not reduce identities on the African continent to being either market-based or cultural.[22] It is also visible in scholars' adaptations of the notion of "civil society," using Africa's recent and distant past to offer a broader and deeper view of the idea of civil society that is freed from its Eurocentric baggage.[23] Equally, this has been done by Harrison as he rethinks class struggle through African experiences, recovering unequal economic relations as pertinent to how we understand forms of collective action and social organisation that are also inflected with distinctions of generation, region or ethnic identity.[24]

We thus argue that African pasts and present offer the opportunity to escape the baggage of particular assumptions, histories and languages that come with viewing the

world from western scholarship. The study of publics must move beyond weighing whether or not Eurocentric theories and concepts are applicable to African realities. Scholarship on publics has been burdened by an overwhelming expectation and common practice to begin any study with reference to Jürgen Habermas' seminal and critical study of the public sphere in 18th and 19th western Europe.[25] Habermas' study reinvigorated an interest in the analytical value of publics and the public sphere. In addition, his approach, language and normative bent have become the basis for further adaptations, applications and critiques the idea of publics.

The search for Habermas, or Arendt,[26] or Warner[27] in Africa is at best unhelpful and futile; at worst it is dangerous. Yet that cannot be the only option. Thinking heuristically with and through scholarship from outside the continent may still be valuable. Even more important is to be in conversation with that scholarship, and to see it as open for revision, appropriation and development. We might find, for example, that undue emphasis is given to deliberation, speech and text in western scholarship that draws on these authors, at the expense of what they have to say about sociality, appearances, and spectacle.

Equally, the study of publics in Africa and the digital turn must build upon other, more prominent scholarly genres that have addressed African specificities. First among these is the study of popular culture. It is perhaps not an overstatement to say that in African Studies popular culture brought everyday politics back in. We should not forget its roots in the work of Stuart Hall,[28] and that it was about understanding dissent and alternative solidarities, "the people versus the power-bloc." Motivated by an interest and inquiry into cultural and social practices, idioms and norms, the study of popular culture takes into account material and discursive dimensions of everyday collective political and social activity.[29] Similarly, any retrieval of the study of publics in Africa

can and should be an analytical enquiry within a critical framework. Equally, studies of popular culture are not without their challenges, limited by the slipperiness of what it means to be 'popular,' and the ease of defining popular according to past and simplistic counterpositions of, for example, mass versus high culture.[30] In this way, the rejuvenation of the study of popular culture might also benefit from a rethink of publics, and a rethink of the complex and dynamic ways that people communicate and share information in everyday life.

Finally, the study of publics in Africa in a digital age presents an opportunity for scholars to unravel aspects of digital transformations that can contribute to the understanding of these phenomena in multiple elsewheres far beyond. Here, the rich examination of how digital communications and more pluralised media contexts have transformed popular culture offers a very different enquiry into the politics of the digital. As multiple elsewheres grapple with the rise of populist strategies and identity politics through digital modes and means, riddled with rumour, alternative 'truths' and conspiracy, what might a study of digital publics in Africa have to offer? 'Digital' becomes a source of urgency, and a new analytical entry-point, towards understanding fundamental questions around thinking about publics in Africa, and digital society well beyond.

This Special Issue

The contributions to this special issue capture the particularities, diversity and dynamism of people increasingly orienting towards collective concerns through digital media in the region. Contributing to a broader agenda of releasing the study of publics from their western heritage, these studies begin with empirical realities, situated locally within Eastern Africa, which transgress into digitally-mediated communications. Contributors bring in western and/or locally rooted approaches to identifying publics

and their significance, as they argue for their value in illuminating the practices, places and media of publics. Each contributor begins from an interest in everyday information flows beyond the state, and public discussion and consideration of ideas of common concern, which are materialising through digital media. However, they are not bound to one normative or descriptive view of what publics are, and why they are politically significant. This allows for the emergence of creative and diverse approaches to publics as the different contributors explore distinct manifestations of public information flows and discussion in Eastern Africa.

Taken together, this is an eye-opening collection on the unfolding practices of citizens convening and participating in discussions using both newer and older media and communication platforms across Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Zimbabwe. By including digital media within the empirical scope of analysis, these articles test the limits of the concept of publics in practice – what it offers, what it includes and excludes, and with what effects.

Within wider scholarship framed by a dualism between those who paint the digital as wholly new and overwhelming, and those who write off this view as technologically deterministic, the contributors to this special issue grapple with complex empirical realities across eastern Africa. They cover diverse disciplinary perspectives and varied empirical cases from mobile phone applications for dating and relationships, to communication on WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and weblogs. This analytical flexibility and diversity, we argue, is the root of the value and contribution of this special issue as a whole. They draw insight, approaches and motivation from a wider interest in de-westernising political scholarship, interpreting this call in different ways. This includes resurrecting the analytical value of established ideas of publics by taking the work of Warner or Arendt or others as a framework through which to capture reality

rather than to assess it vis-à-vis an idealistic and ahistorical benchmark. Others continue with the intersection of publics with other scholarly genres, returning to the notion of popular culture to explore publics through digital media. Still others begin from historically and locally grounded ideas and approaches, seeking to avoid almost altogether the language and particularities of publics in existing western-driven scholarship. In so doing, contributors diverge from dominant scholarship in their treatment of both the digital and publics in two important ways. First, they acknowledge and unpack the dynamic, diverse and chaotic dimensions of digital media, as they are used and experienced in specific places and material contexts, as well as virtual networks. Second, they do so from an interest in what the notion of publics can help to reveal, while foregoing any single conceptual approach. Instead, they test and adapt western ideas, or invoke locally grounded concepts and other scholarly genres.

A common thread and contribution to scholarship runs through these diverse empirically-grounded studies. Effectively detaching scholarship from its western heritage will not take place by replacing western dominated approaches by simplistic and ahistorical frameworks, or by remaining straightjacketed by the binaries invoked in existing scholarship. The contributors to this special issue recognise this, and show how openness to diversity, both empirically and conceptually, can draw out particular and shared insights.

Publics are possible and significant in their diversity and contradictions. Contributors show, on one side, how publics – even ‘digital’ ones - are tied to place and materiality. They are tangible in the media, texts, images and words through which people make themselves known and interact with diverse information and viewpoints. On the other side, they recognise how the very nature of publics is evasive. Publics are realised in fleeting moments when people engage with circulating information. Their

boundaries are intangible, as to be public means to be open and inclusive of strangers. This becomes increasingly apparent as publics encompass and take place through virtual networks, connecting distributed persons. As this special issue vividly demonstrates, both de-westernising and capturing publics in a digital age in Africa require openness to a diversity of disciplines, approaches and questions.

In what follows, we introduce the contributions that make up this special issue. The contributions are organised around four thematic areas, tied to how they approach the problem and phenomena of publics in a digital age. We begin with those contributors who question the novelty of digital media by situating contemporary practices historically and in relation to locally-grounded concepts. The next set of contributors focus on publics in digital media as social spaces, invoking popular culture to unpack the nature of publics online. From here, contributors turn more explicitly to political dimensions of digital publics in Eastern Africa, with one set interrogating the kind of politics that emerges in the practices of digital publics, and the final set of contributions examining the relationship of digital publics to forms of political control and authority.

New Media, Old Idioms

As the novelty of digital media fades, this is an opportune moment to think more critically about the ways that old and new merge in cyberspace. Part of this task involves exploring how the rationalities, forms of interaction and discourses of digital publics relate to those of older publics convened by print media or radio. At the same time, there is need to investigate if and how older cultural idioms are being re-enacted on and through digital platforms. A number of the articles presented here take up these avenues of enquiry and proffer rich empirical material that attests to the ways that new media and old idioms are being combined in evermore innovative ways in digital

spaces. Taken together, these articles underscore the importance of placing the exchanges on digital platforms within a longer-term perspective.

Irene Brunotti's article takes the study of publics to the Island of Zanzibar following the controversial annulment of the results of Tanzania's general elections in October 2015. Brunotti situates discussions on social media about the electoral aftermath and Zanzibari politics in the local and historical phenomenon of the *baraza* in coastal eastern Africa. Rather than take digitally-mediated discussions as necessarily new and/or virtual, she explores online spaces for deliberation as a "cyberbaraza," embedded in and reflecting Swahili language and culture. Significantly, Brunotti's article detaches the study of publics from western histories and shows how more locally grounded concepts can be usefully deployed to identify and situate digitally enabled discussions and information flows.

This recovery of locally-grounded concepts is not simply a question of taking the latest 'turn' in the academy. Rather, it is driven by recognition of the reality that local socio-cultural values and idioms shape the ways that people understand and make use of digital media. Several contributors vividly show this intersection of established values and idioms with digitally-mediated communications. This comes through strongly in Siri Lamoureaux and Timm Sureau's article, which explores the way that the Arabic cultural institution of the *nafeer*, a long-standing practice of forming work groups in northern Sudan, is taken online to mobilise grassroots disaster relief during flooding in Sudan in 2013. While it has its origins as a community work group founded on an ideology of mutual support and solidarity, Lamoureaux and Sureau show how tech-savvy Sudanese youth activists transposed the idea onto the internet in the aftermath of the floods. Using platforms like Facebook, Ushahidi and Google Earth,

they were able successfully mobilise an 8000-strong volunteer base, and channel support for affected communities.

Similarly, George Karekwaivanane's study of the "unruly public" convened by Baba Jukwa through Facebook offers insight into the ways that the old and the new are being creatively fused on digital platforms. In the run up to the 2013 Zimbabwe elections, Baba Jukwa's Facebook account became a space for active political discussion outside of the state's control. Through an analysis of the deliberations on Baba Jukwa's Facebook page, Karekwaivanane shows how older forms of political self-representations such as the Chimurenga names (*noms de guerre*) used during the anti-colonial war of the 1960s and 1970s were resurrected and employed as pseudonyms on a digital platform. He also illustrates the ways that communicative practices such as conspiracy theorizing, that have long been a feature of Zimbabwean politics, have found their way onto social media. In studying the public that is convoked by Baba Jukwa, Karekwaivanane makes the case for a move away from normative conceptions of the public sphere, and a focus on understanding 'actually-existing publics' in all their messiness.

Turning to Kenya, Inge Brinkman's article sees echoes of past discursive practices in public discussion on the internet. She, too, takes a general election as an opportunity to draw out the nature and possibilities of public discussions through online blogs. Looking at the weblog kenyanpundit, which was active in news provision and discussion during the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya, Brinkman asks: What is the public being addressed through the blog? She argues there are historical continuities and reflections in contemporary forms of public and political information flows. Historically-grounded ideas of a communication circuit and social diary allow

her to draw out the narrative and processual aspects of news provision and public discussion through the kenyanpundit blog.

Together these articles show that we cannot know the nature and scope of 'publics' and being part of a 'public,' without considering the intersection of past practices and contemporary transgressions into digital media. Digital media is not disassociated from place, but rather online discursive practices are informed by, and reconfigure, local idioms, experiences and norms.

Popular Culture, Sociality and Identity

Shifting away from an interest in historical continuities and situated-ness, contributors to this special issue also interrogate digitally-mediated discussions from an interest in belonging and identity, pointing to the creative possibilities of digitally enabled practices in reconfiguring popular culture and socialities. Digital media provide new possibilities for people to interact with one another and with the world around them. They alter existing forms of social exchange and belonging, and create new ones. Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter are increasing awareness of shared identities that transcend physical place in everyday activities and routines. In so doing they are giving rise to new forms of 'networked sociality' that are inflected by, or in conflict with, local cultural values and norms. Here, the concept of publics is deployed to interrogate the contribution of digitally-enabled communication to shared socialities – be they dominant, popular or marginalised.

Austin Bryan's article presents one example of these emerging networked socialities in his study of the use of dating and romance-based mobile phone applications among stigmatised LGBTQ communities in Kampala, Uganda. Bryan finds analytical purchase in Warner's idea of damaged publicness, and shows that the digital is an important channel for the configuration and preservation of stigmatised identities,

through discussions very much concerned with daily survival and desires. Digital communicative channels provide a way to organise to meet material needs in situations in which meeting one's survival is threatened. Yet, digital channels employed as counterpublics for marginalised identities have their own hierarchies and forms of exclusion. Bryan argues that these damaged publics, which extend into and dependent upon digitally-mediated communication, must be viewed as simultaneously public and personal. In addition, they have varying registrars and hierarchies of belonging and safety for stigmatised identities.

Part of this renewed attention to networked socialities revisits questions on the relationship between popular culture and publics. As new forms of popular expression are unfolding through digital media, we see new developments such as entertainment websites, social media forums about celebrities in film and music, and speculative and gossip-based media. In this issue, Andrea Grant's contribution provides an ethnographic lens that reveals the potential for counterpublics in digital forms of popular culture in Rwanda. Grant draws our attention to the Kinyarwanda-language entertainment websites that have sprung up in Rwanda, which are popular amongst the youth. While they are not political in content, Grant explores how these vibrant websites reveal a shared discursive space in which youth produce and imagine themselves as citizens. They provide a window into the kinds of conversations that young people have amongst themselves, through vocabularies and spaces that are mostly unregulated by the state. Contrasting with Habermas' critique of mass culture, she argues mass culture is not necessarily a problem to publics, notably in contexts where other channels are not present. The content of these sites might be celebrity culture, but the activity itself has a political end: offering a bottom-up perspective of Kigali that jars with the government's top-down 'vision' of the city. Similar to Bryan's view of online spaces, forms of

exclusion and hierarchy come into play within Grant's study of celebrity gossip websites, shown to be hostile to female celebrities.

George Ogola's line of questioning about the activity of "Kenyans on Twitter" takes us to a different view of the relationship between publics, popular culture and digital media, though one that again highlights their inequalities and exclusions. He identifies disruptive, satirical discourses in the activity of Kenyans on Twitter, specifically by well-known bloggers and around #hashtags, like #occupyplayground and #whatwouldmagufulido. He asks us to question the nature of these digital communications as popular, arguing instead that material requirements for access prevent the digital from realising the popular *per se*. Forms of self expression and alternative narrative strategies are visible in the use of humour and memes on Twitter, but take place through hidden hierarchies and forms of exclusion. By juxtaposing studies that take a historical and a social view of publics via digital media, this special issue illustrates how contemporary digital publics are concurrently historically situated, and constantly new and active. They are informed by the past, but are also continually re-configuring shared identities and socialities, with their own hierarchies and exclusions.

Digital Publics and the Practice of Politics

The rapid and pervasive ways that digital media have grown in access and use in Africa in recent decades indicate potentially profound changes to how people interact in politically significant ways. Scholars remain divided on the question of the political efficacy of digital media. While some have emphasised the capacity of digital media to connect and mobilise citizens at a hitherto unimaginable frequency and scale, others have questioned the extent to which online mobilisation can be translated into political organisation and action. Can a mouse-click or a tweet can be considered political

action? Some suggest such acts may in fact preclude concrete political organisation. At the heart of this debate is the understudied area of the connections between forms of communication and the nature of publics as the site of everyday political practices. A call to rethink publics in the context of digital media allows the contributors to this special issue to return to basic questions about the nature and manifestations of authority and resistance on the African continent.

Peter Chonka's article on fragmented publics in the Somali region, Stephanie Diepeveen's analysis of a discussion-based "youth parliament" on Facebook, and Dan Omanga's study of the WhatsApp group "Nakuru Analysts" in Kenya, provide persuasive arguments about how and when referring to *digital* publics as such might help to illuminate insights into the political significance of contemporary public discussions. A focus on 'digital publics' across the Somali region and the diaspora enables Chonka to identify ways that Somali identity takes shape and is contested across the fragmented state authorities and territories of The Federal Government of Somalia, Somaliland, and Puntland. Through the intersection of 'old' media with digital technologies in this context of fragmented states and statelessness, Chonka argues there exists a transnational Somali-language public arena that is, somewhat conversely, an outcome of political instability and flux. Publics, he argues, do not depend on a referential territorial state in order to take shape. They can be visible in the circulation of information across fragmented states, and across local populations and the diaspora.

Stephanie Diepeveen's study of Facebook use in coastal Kenya argues for the analytical value of seeing Facebook-mediated political discussions as manifesting publics in all of their messiness and complexity. She points out how digitally-mediated publics vividly capture some of the contradictions that lie at the essence of all publics as they unfold in practice. Taking the case of a public discussion group on Facebook,

convened by a few Mombasan young people in 2014, Diepeveen explains how open and public discussion is possible through specific structures, interests and forms of control on Facebook. While these features of Facebook allow for a 'public' online, Diepeveen voices concern about how they intersect with participants' experiences, suggesting practices of publics on Facebook are reinforcing pre-existing, personalised ideas of citizenship and citizen-state relations.

Through a case study of the WhatsApp group "Nakuru Analysts," Dan Omanga also explores the intersection of political authority and publics through digitally-enabled channels. He identifies and explores the presence of government figures within publics, taking the view that publics in practice are not necessarily separate from government, but react to and are entangled with changing devolved government structures in Kenya. The WhatsApp group gives shape to a public that is both exclusive and dynamic, and both includes members of government and self-defines as opposition.

State, Capital and Digital Power

The presence of the state and forms of authority in publics in Diepeveen's and Omanga's articles points to the analytical purchase of considering digital publics and counterpublics with reference to the exercise of authority. The instantaneous and seemingly unmediated nature of digital communications, coupled with notions such as 'cyberspace' and 'virtual reality,' mistakenly distract us from the material infrastructure, capital investment and institutional control that make digital communications, and digital publics possible. 'Publics' seem naturally 'good,' and they speak to some deep democratic commitments of openness, exchange, sharing and transparency. Yet publicity can be the servant of capital[31] and surveillance.[32] In short, the same enabling technologies for publics can, in the control of powerful actors - from national security agencies to Internet giants - be directed at purposes and logics that are

quite at odds with the political agency and power of citizens coming together.

With this in mind, contributors to this special issue examine the presence and nature of publics within strong and authoritarian states, looking at how they might actually reinforce authoritarian control. Looking at the Sudanese state, Siri Lamoureux and Timm Sureau push us to take seriously the technological opportunities for the state to extend authoritarian control through digital media and communications. Still, they recognise limits to state surveillance and control. By taking the case of *Nafeer*, a grassroots initiative to assist with flood relief in 2013 as mentioned above, they explain how the very coordination of humanitarian and material efforts through digital media punctuated an image of state control and authority.

Yet, even more than digital media as a tool for state control, Iginio Gagliardone, Nicole Stremlau and Gerawork Aynekulu's study of the Ethiopian state indicates how the state is constructed in the development and use of digital media. The Ethiopian government, leading up to the 2015 elections, systematically engaged in forms of covert and overt control over digitally-mediated publics through technical, political and rhetorical means. This highly controlled and surveilled digital environment served to effectively subdue the scope and content of public debate and political campaigning on social media. Yet, here too, state control proves to be contingent and vulnerable. Renewed street and digital protests in 2016 and 2017 in Ethiopia suggest that the tame online public discussions during the elections reflected a disengaging public reacting to the perceived illegitimacy of electoral institutions, as opposed to submitting to overwhelming state control. Thus, in Ethiopia as in Sudan, there emerges a picture of digitally-mediated publics curtailed, but never fully or finally dominated, by strong state control. While far from the unruly public convoked by Baba Jukwa in Zimbabwe, these

digital publics can be paradoxically precarious but also resilient, suppressed yet capable of resurgence.

Conclusion

Digital media present scholars with a particular set of challenges empirically and methodologically. What approaches, methods and forms of analysis are appropriate to dealing with the sheer amount of data, the speed of communication, the bases and forms of fragmentation and connectedness that we are confronted with? Beginning from diverse disciplinary perspectives, the contributors to this special issue reveal, in different ways, how the concept of publics might be usefully employed to give insight into the political and social nature and significance of digitally-mediated communications in contemporary Africa. Moreover, by thinking carefully about digitally mediated communicative practices through the lens of publics, we can think again and anew about publics in Africa in vitally important ways.

There is much analytical richness that can emerge when beginning from the diversity and dynamism of publics in practice as opposed to being wedded to particular normative ideas about their nature and significance. It is this openness in empirical and conceptual approaches that we argue becomes the basis for any effective attempt to move beyond westernised and normative scholarship. Contributors show how publics can be personal, material and imagined, and can be interwoven with the state and political authorities. The value of considering publics as both situated and ephemeral is borne out. Even when discussion appears confined to digital means, it is never fully divorced from place. Equally, confining publics to a medium or territory loses sight of their inherently unbounded potential for publicity.

Rapid changes in eastern Africa's communications landscape brought about through digital media provide both an opportunity and an imperative to return to basic

questions about how flows of information and ideas amongst connected strangers animate and configure social and political life. This special issue makes inroads into how we might take up the challenge of embracing the nature and complexity of contemporary media and communications in order to deepen our understanding of them. By foregoing a temptation to seek to resolve all normative and analytical quandaries, we resurrect and rethink the idea of publics as both a heuristic means as well as an object of study for coming to grips with the nature and significance of burgeoning new communicative practices in Africa in a digital age.

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[1] For example, Alzouma, "Myths;" Barber, *An anthropology of texts*; Brennan, *A history of Sauti ya Mvita*; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*; Englund, *Human rights*; *Gunner* et al., *Radio in Africa*; Larkin, *Signal and Noise*; Mokoena, "An assembly of readers;" Peterson, *Creative writing*; Roach, "The Western World."

[2] ITU World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Database.

[3] Etzo and Collender, "The mobile phone 'revolution'," 659.

[4] GSMA, 2015.

[5] Gagliardone, "New media;" Gagliardone et al., "A tale of two publics?"; Lamoureaux and Sureau, "Knowledge and legitimacy."

[6] For example, Archambault, "Cruising through uncertainty;" Breckenridge, "The biometric state;" de Bruijn et al., Mobile phones; de Bruijn et al., Side@Ways; Hahn and Kibora, "The domestication of the mobile phone;" Obadare, "Playing politics;" Wasserman, "Mobile phones."

[7] Ogola, "What would Magufuli do."

[8] Gagliardone et al., "A tale of two publics?"

[9] Grant, "Bringing the *Daily* Mail."

[10] Lamoureux and Sureau, "Knowledge and legitimacy."

[11] Jacob and Akpan, Silencing Boko Haram.

[12] De Bruijn et al., "Mobile interconnections."

[13] Burrell, *Invisible users*; de Bruijn et al., *Mobile Phones*; Pype, '[Not] talking."

[14] Diepeveen, "Re-imagining publics."

[15] Baym, *Personal connections*; Couldry, "What and where;" Fraser, "Transnationalizing the public sphere."

[16] Mustapha, "Introduction;" Banégas et al., "Espaces publics de la parole."

[17] Mudhai et al., *African media.*

[18] Banégas et al., "Espaces publics de la parole."

[19] Akinbobola, "Theorising the African digital public sphere;" Dahlgren, *The political web*; Manganga, "The internet as public sphere, 112; Mudhai et al., *African media*; Ya'u, "Ambivalence and activism."

[20] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors*; Willems and Mano, *Everyday media culture.* See also Mbembe, Achille. "What is postcolonial thinking? An interview with Achille Mbembe." *Eurozine,* 9 January 2008. Retrieved from http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2008-01-09-mbembe-en.pdf on 16 May 2017.

[21] Comaroff and Comaroff, "Theory from the South."

[22] Mamdani, *Citizen and subject*; "New Frontiers of Social Policy." Arusha Conference, Arusha, Tanzania, 12-15 December 2005.

[23] Willems, "Interrogating public sphere;" Comaroff and Comaroff, "Introduction."

[24] Harrison, *Issues in the Contemporary Politics.*

[25] Habermas, *The structural transformation*; Habermas, "Further reflections."

[26] Arendt, *The human condition*; Arendt, *The promise of politics.*

[27] Warner, *The letters of the republic*; Warner, *Publics and counterpublics.*

[28] Hall, "Notes;" Hall and Whannell, *The popular arts.*

[29] Barber, "Popular arts;" Barber, *Print culture.*

[30] Barber, "Popular arts."

[31] Dean, "Publicity's secret."

[32] Gagliardone, "New media."

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